

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 PM-05 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15
CIAE-00 DODE-00 INR-10 NSAE-00 PA-01 ICA-11 SSC-01
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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2094

INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY RABAT

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 5616

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, TS

SUBJ: MINSTER OF HEALTH RESIGNS AMID RUMORS OF BOURGUIBA'S
DISPLEASURE: MORE CHANGES TO COME?

REF: TUNIS 5459

1. ALL TUNISIAN PAPERS AUGUST 5, CARRIED BRIEF ANNOUNCE-
MENT THAT MINISTER OF HEALTH, PROFESSOR MONGI BEN HAMIDA,
HAD REQUESTED THE CHIEF OF STATE TO RELEASE HIM OF
MINISTERIAL DUTIES. CITING COMMUNIQUE FROM PRESIDENTIAL
OFFICE, PROF. BEN HAMIDA NO LONGER FOUND IT POSSIBLE TO
CONTINUE PRIVATE PRACTICE IN NEUROLOGY AND OVERSEE
MINISTRY OF PUBLIC HEALTH AT SAME TIME. ANNOUNCEMENT
CLOSED WITH STATEMENT THAT BOURGUIBA HAD ACQUIESCED TO
BEN HAMIDA'S REQUEST.

2. THERE APPEARS TO BE MORE TO BEN HAMIDA'S RESIGNATION
THAN SIMPLE CONFLICT BETWEEN HIS PRIVATE PROFESSIONAL
INTERESTS AND HIS PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITIES. MAIN ISSUE
SEEMS TO BE THAT OF DR. BEN HAMIDA'S SUPERVISION OF
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PRESIDENT'S MEDICAL CARE OVER NUMBER OF YEARS, AND
SPECIFICALLY THE MEDICINES ADMINISTERED TO BOURGUIBA IN
THE RECENT PAST. (NOTE: AS CHIEF TUNISIAN MEDICAL ADVISOR
TO PRESIDENT SINCE EVEN BEFORE HE ASSUMED MINISTERIAL
POST IN DECEMBER 1977, BEN HAMIDA REPORTEDLY HAD BEEN
RESPONSIBLE FOR COORDINATING THE WORK OF BOURGUIBA'S
TEAM OF SWISS AND TUNISIAN PHYSICIANS.)

3. THE EMBASSY HAS PREVIOUSLY REPORTED (REFTEL) THAT BOURGUIBA HAS RADICALLY CHANGED HIS MEDICAL TREATMENT (SPECIFICALLY MEDICINES AND DRUGS) AS THE RESULT OF ADVICE GIVEN BY A NEW TEAM OF FRENCH DOCTORS HE HAS BEEN CONSULTING SINCE HIS ARRIVAL IN PARIS ABOUT A MONTH AGO. FIRST PUBLIC NEWS OF CHANGE IN TREATMENT APPEARED IN INDEPENDENT DAILY LE TEMPS ON AUGUST 3. CITING AN AFP DISPATCH FROM PARIS, LE TEMPS REPORTED THAT PRESIDENT WAS "IN PROCESS OF REGAINING HIS HEALTH AFTER PERIOD OF ILLNESS AND FATIGUE RESULTING FROM AN EXCESS OF MEDICINES FOR HIS INSOMNIA." ARTICLE CONTINUED THAT "ONE PARTICULARLY STRONG MEDICINE WHICH TAXED HIS HEALTH HAS BEEN PROGRESSIVELY REDUCED." A PERSON CLOSE TO TUNISIAN EMBASSY IN PARIS WAS NOTED AS SOURCE OF AFP STORY.

4. WE UNDERSTAND THAT BOURGUIBA IS DELIGHTED WITH NEW TREATMENTS AND IS FEELING PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY STRONGER THAN HE HAS IN YEARS. BOURGUIBA NOW REPORTEDLY BLAMES BEN HAMIDA FOR HAVING PRESCRIBED DRUG IN QUESTION, AND ACCORDING TO SOME STORIES IT WAS BOURGUIBA WHO SACKED BEN HAMIDA. ACCORDING TO OTHERS IT WAS BEN HAMIDA WHO INDIGNANTLY RESIGNED IN RESPONSE TO AFP REPORT AND TO INFERENCES OF PRESIDENT'S DISSATISFACTION. KNOWING HOW MUCH BEN HAMIDA ENJOYED BEING MINISTER OF HEALTH, WE SUSPECT IT WAS BOURGUIBA WHO DEMANDED BEN HAMIDA'S CONFIDENTIAL

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DEPARTURE FROM CABINET. WE ALSO KNOW THAT WASSILA BOURGUIBA RESENTED BEN HAMIDA'S CONTROL OVER PRESIDENT'S MEDICAL CARE (TO HER EXCLUSION) AND IT MAY WELL BE THAT SHE HAD A HAND IN HELPING PRESIDENT REACH CONCLUSION THAT BEN HAMIDA MUST GO.

5. COMMENT. ALL OF THIS MAY END WITH BEN HAMIDA'S RETURN TO PRIVATE LIFE AND NOTHING MORE. NEVERTHELESS, THIS ATTACK SEEMS TO BE ANOTHER INDICATION THAT WASSILA BOURGUIBA'S INFLUENCE OVER THE PRESIDENT IS GROWING. MRS. BOURGUIBA'S PIQUE AGAINST BEN HAMIDA WAS PERSONAL, BUT SHE ALSO HAS OTHER FISH TO FRY. MRS. BOURGUIBA IS KNOWN TO MISTRUST NOUIRA AND TO BE STRONGLY OPPOSED TO SAYAH. SHE ALSO HAS CONNECTIONS WITH MASMOUDI AND IS CLOSE TO TAHAR BELKHODJA WHOM REPORTEDLY SHE SEES FREQUENTLY IN PARIS. WHILE WE DO NOT WANT TO BE ALARMIST, IT SHOULD BE RECALLED THAT IN THE PAST BOURGUIBA HAS USED EXCUSES OF ILLNESS OR ABSENCE TO JUSTIFY THE SCUTTling OF HAND-CHOSEN LIEUTENANTS WHO HAVE FAITHFULLY CARRIED OUT PRESIDENTIAL ORDERS. (BEN SALAH IN 1969 AND BAHY LADGHAM IN 1970). THE DRUG ASPECT COULD CONCEIVABLY BE USED TO JUSTIFY ANOTHER POLITICAL RESHUFFLE. AGAIN WITHOUT BEING ALARMIST, WE WISH TO NOTE A TELEPHONE

CALL RECEIVED AUGUST 7 FROM IV GRANTEE HAMMADI BEN
HAMMED, THE DIRECTOR OF DIALOGUE (PSD PARTY MAGAZINE).
BEN HAMMED CALLED ICA/TUNIS TO POSTPONE TO SEPTEMBER 20
HIS ONE-MONTH INTERNATIONAL VISITOR TRIP TO THE U.S.,
SCHEDULED TO BEGIN AUGUST 15. REASON GIVEN: PSD DIRECTOR SAYAH
HAD TOLD HIM HE MUST STAY IN TUNIS DURING NEXT 30 DAYS AS
NUMBER OF "IMPORTANT CHANGES IN GOVERNMENT ARE TO TAKE PLACE
THEN."
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